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ABSTRACT

This paper offers criticism of rural education research methods, and identifies areas in need of more or better systematic inquiry. It suggests the need to increase the quantity of the highest quality of research and the need for researchers to reach policy makers and "mainstream" education journals more effectively. Five main problems with current research methods, agendas, or products are discussed. This paper suggests that the best collective research is required to promote equity in education. It calls for a clear assessment of the appropriateness of existing school models for rural America, and the need for identifying alternatives, if they exist. The research community needs to expand its databases; available resouces are too often ignored or overlooked. Educators must become more assertive in identifying the context of education as a legitimate empirical variable. Finally, the paper calls for researchers to increase the number of state-by-state studies that illuminate diversity within rural education. (TES)

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Remarks of Walter G. McIntire to the National Rural Education Research Forum, Bismark, North Dakota. September 23, 1988

The Quality of Research

This presentation is not designed to criticize rural education research in the sense of finding fault, but to criticize in the sense of identifying areas where I perceive we are in need of more or better systematic inquiry.

I would first like to address two issues that in my mind cut across the field of rural education research. The first is that one cannot talk about the quality of research in this field without also, and perhaps first, talking about the quantity. We have seen during this decade a considerable increase in research addressing issues of interest to rural educators. Much of it has been of the highest quality in terms of technical merit, applicability and relevence for policy makers and practitioners. Obviously, there has been a parallel increase in the quantity of work that is not of that standard. Rather than dwell on the deficiencies of the latter, I propose today to try to identify for you, from my perspective, a few areas where more work is required that is of the quality of the best we have seen. In other words, I propose that we need to increase the quantity of research that is of the quality of the best we have seen and produced recently.

In a related vein, we who identify ourselves as rural education researchers can be heartened by the development and continued existence of several journals devoted to a large extent or exclusively to rural education research issues and agendas. It is a good thing that these journals have appeared, continue to expand, and will hopefully

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flourish. However, valuable as they are to those of us who read and publish in them (and get tenure!), they will only truly benefit the field of rural education when people outside the field become regular readers. In particular, we need to get our messages to policy-makers. At the same time we need to work to get rural education research into the "mainstream" education journals. I suspect that Alan DeYoung's recent Review of Educational Research article has had more widespread attention than much of the best that we have seen in "our" journals.

Now I would like to talk briefly about five specific topics, each of which represents in one way or another what I perceive to be a problem with regards to our current research methods, agendas, and/or products.

First, the issue of equity in rural education is not behind us. The so-called "reform" movement has spawned numerous projects, reports, programs and recognition ceremonies designed to convince rural constituents that "excellence" characterizes the local educational endeavors, or that small schools can be as excellent as larger ones. In our rush to defend ourselves let us not forget that in many parts of rural America there are school systems and communities that are unable, unwilling or unmotivated to provide the resources necessary to provide our children with equal educational opportunity. Our best and our collective research efforts are required if equity is to be attained at local, state and national levels.

The effective schools research has dramatically impacted our perspectives on American schools. My concern is that this research seems to infer there are a few "good" models which are most often found in suburban America. The rural research community needs to assess more clearly the appropriateness of the existing models for rural America,

and needs to identify alternatives if they exist. For example, can you have effective school leadership if the principal (so critical in the effective school) is also a full-time teacher?

We, the rural research community, need to expand our efforts at working with large data bases. Too often we appear to be content to explore our issues in relatively parochial ways. The availability of such resources as the Federal Census, the High School and Beyond data, the voluminous archives of every city and state department of education, etc. are too often overlooked or ignored in our efforts. The development of educational policy at the state and national level that addresses the needs and aspirations of rural America can only benefit from research that examines issues in the largest contexts.

Speaking of contexts, those of us who are responsible for the identification, development and nurturance of the next generation of rural education researchers must become more assertive in identifying the context of education as a legitimate empirical variable. Our universities and research laboratories are providing us with colleagues whose depth of knowledge, analytical tools and skills, and technological facility are only to be envied. Yet, in my experience, they are content specialists; in counseling, in administration, in special education, in curriculum, etc. It appears to me that only on-the-job do they become exposed to the context of education issues. We need to be more comfortable with ourselves as somewhat context-bound in our interests, and be more assertive in our training and mentoring; context is a legitimate educational variable!

My fifth and final point: I mentioned before that we need to work more often in the large data bases available to us. We need, however,

probably even more desperately, to increase in number and quality, state-by-state studies that will illuminate the diversity of this thing we call rural education. One brief example: I live in a state, Maine, where approximately sixty percent of the cost of education is borne by the state. Maine is bordered on the west by New Hampshire, which funds less than ten percent of the local cost, and New Brunswick, which funds education completely at the provincial level. Such diversity, on a single variable, demands analysis within the settings. Not only do state and provincial finance policies vary, so do regional economies, and local goals. We need both the macro and the micro perspectives in our research agendas.

In summary, I'm not seriously concerned about the quality issue in rural education research. I am more concerned about the quantity issue. I'm confident that we have a core of capable and concerned researchers with rural education agendas who need more colleagues, greater resources and perhaps more clearly defined individual and collective research agendas.